

Testimony of Nichelle A. Mullins, Esq. on behalf of Center for Children's Advocacy
In Support of Raised Bill 5357: An Act Concerning Chronic Absenteeism

Education committee

March 3, 2014

I submit this testimony on behalf of the Center for Children's Advocacy, a non-profit organization based at the University of Connecticut School of Law. The Center provides holistic legal services for poor children in Connecticut's communities through individual representation and systematic advocacy. I am currently a member of the board of directors.

I have practiced law in the state of Connecticut for the past 12 years. For approximately three years, I served as a Court Appointed Attorney for Juvenile Matters at the Hartford Juvenile court. I represented both parents and children in neglect and abuse cases. I also represented children in delinquency and FWSN (family with service needs) cases. During my appointment, I attended numerous training sessions sponsored by the Center and had the opportunity to work with its attorneys on various cases. I have seen firsthand the effects of chronic absenteeism in the children I defended in delinquency court.

Let's take the case of Carlos F. He was a 13 year old child who pretended to go to school but never quite actually showed up for class. I met him when a FWSN was filed by the school. The FWSN stated that Carlos missed multiple days of school and also had behavioral problems when he did attend school. Upon further investigation and interviews with Carlos' mother and school personnel, I was able to find that Carlos was a pleasant kid who had difficulty understanding the material presented in class. He was not diagnosed with a learning disability because no one had taken the time to conduct an assessment of his learning abilities. In addition, his mother was unemployed. So instead of going to school, where he didn't understand the material being taught, Carlos was trying to find a way to bring home money to feed his mother and little brother. To Carlos, missing school to make money for his family to survive made more sense than going to school and not being able to understand what his teachers were saying.

Raised Bill 5357 would require schools to identify kids like Carlos F., implement school interventions and link the kids/families with community resources before these kids enter the juvenile justice system. This Bill has the ability ensure that students receive services before it is too late. They will still have a chance to be successful.

The current law does not require schools to keep data about chronic absenteeism. However, Raised Bill 5357 not only will require schools to maintain this data, it will also require schools to do something with the data. My one proposed revision would be to ensure that the definition of chronic absenteeism includes all kinds of absences: excused, unexcused, and disciplinary absences, and to make sure it is calculated as 10% or more of school days.

This bill is a step in the right direction towards saving our youth; the now generation. It places accountability where it should. Schools will have to strategically address and combat truancy and

abseentism. If the saying is true, "It takes a village to raise a child," this bill requires the village to do its part.

Thank you very much for your time and attention to this very important issue.

Respectfully Submitted,

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